

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Firearm Safety

### Basic firearm safety rules

Safe handling of firearms begins with **four basic rules**. **Know these rules and follow them at all times!**

#### 1. Always point the muzzle of your gun in a safe direction.

Never point the gun at yourself or others, even if you are certain it isn't loaded. Determine the safest available muzzle direction (at the ground or in the air) and keep your gun pointed in that direction.

#### 2. Always treat every gun as if it were loaded.

Even if you are certain a gun is unloaded, act as if it were loaded. Even double-check yourself!

#### 3. Always be sure of your target and beyond.





Never point your gun at something you do not intend to shoot. You must positively identify what you are shooting at and know what lies in front of and beyond it

#### 4. Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to fire.

The natural instinct when picking up a firearm is to put your finger in the trigger guard. **DON'T!** This could cause an accidental discharge if the gun is loaded. In addition, there are some other principles of safe gun handling (see the inside cover of this manual).

### Accepting a firearm

When accepting a firearm from another person:

-  Check that the action is open before touching the firearm. If it isn't, ask the person who is handing you the firearm to open it to show it is unloaded.
-  Visually check that the chamber and magazine are empty of ammunition before touching the firearm.
-  Grasp the firearm with both hands, keeping the muzzle pointed in a safe direction.
-  Say "thank you" to alert the passer to release the firearm.



**Once you pull the trigger, there is no way to bring the bullet or shot back. THINK about your actions before, rather than after, you touch the trigger.**

### Learning Objectives

*At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:*

- State the four basic rules of firearm safety.
- Describe the proper procedure for accepting a firearm from another person.
- Demonstrate proper loading and unloading of firearms.
- Identify a safe method for transporting firearms in vehicles and boats.
- Demonstrate six methods for carrying a firearm safely in the field.
- Identify a safe method for handling a firearm in a tree stand.
- Demonstrate the safe method for crossing an obstacle if hunting alone and if hunting with a partner.
- Demonstrate proper field carries while walking two or three abreast and while walking two or three in single file.
- Define "safe zone of fire" and state its importance.





(can't ...)

## Learning Objectives (continued)

- Explain why it is not a good practice to shoot at a “sky-lined” animal.
- State why hunters need to wear hunter orange clothing and what the requirement is in Montana.
- Describe the procedure for safely cleaning a firearm and storing it.
- State five functions needed for hunting that are impaired if the hunter consumes alcohol or drugs.

## Loading and unloading a firearm

Before learning the procedures described here for loading and unloading firearms review these guidelines:

-  Have someone familiar with the firearm give you guidance. Don't do this on your own!
-  Whenever possible, do not use live ammunition. Use deactivated or “dummy” ammunition to learn how to use your firearm.
-  Keep your finger outside the trigger guard.
-  Practice! The more comfortable you are with the operation of your firearm the more safely you will handle it.

### Loading

Follow the steps below to safely load a firearm. Do not load a firearm until you are able to safely and legally discharge it. It's best to have an experienced person show you how to do it.

1. Make sure there is no ammunition in the firearm or any obstructions in the barrel.
  2. Point the firearm in the safest available direction. Know the location of other persons around you.
  3. Determine if the firearm can be loaded with the safety on. If it can, apply the safety.
  4. Make sure to use the correct cartridge(s) or shell(s) for the firearm by matching the data stamp on the firearm with the data stamp on the ammunition.
  5. Load the firearm. How you do this is determined by the type of firearm you are using. As a general rule:
    - **Single shot firearms:** place the ammunition directly in the chamber, and then close the action.
    - **Lever or pump action firearms with a tubular magazine:** make sure the action is closed, load the magazine, and then cycle the action to bring a round from the magazine to the chamber.
    - **Firearms with a removable box magazine:** load the magazine first and then insert it into the firearm. Close the action to load the chamber.
    - **Firearms with a nonremovable box magazine:** load directly into the magazine and then close the action to load the chamber.
  6. If you were not able to do so before, put the safety on now.
- The firearm is now loaded and ready to use. It requires continuous care and attention until it is unloaded.

## Unloading

Follow the steps below to safely unload a firearm.








Point R O V E	<b>1. Point the firearm in a safe direction.</b> Normally this is at the ground or in the air, in a direction away from others and yourself. Maintain constant control of the muzzle direction.
Point Remove O V E	<b>2. Remove all ammunition.</b> Open the action to remove any cartridges from the chamber. If the firearm is a semi-automatic with a detachable magazine, remove the magazine from the firearm first. This prevents the semi-automatic from chambering another round if the action closes. For virtually all other actions, open the action to remove any cartridges from the chamber first. Remove any detachable magazine and all other cartridges from the firearm. If your firearm does not have a removable magazine, it may be necessary to activate a latch button or other device, or work the action several times to remove the ammunition. Once all ammunition has been removed, leave the action open.
Point Remove Observe V E	<b>3. Observe that the chamber is empty.</b> Check your firearm's chamber to ensure no ammunition or empty casings are present. If so, remove by hand or by working the firearm's action.
Point Remove Observe Verify E	<b>4. Verify that the feed path is empty.</b> A firearm's feed path is the route by which ammunition stored in its magazine is moved to the chamber where it will be fired. Only repeating firearms will have a mechanical feed path. To verify it is free of ammunition and obstructions, you must work the firearm's action and visually check the feed mechanism and magazine.
Point Remove Observe Verify Examine	<b>5. Examine the bore for rust, excessive oil, or obstructions.</b> If present, clean the firearm before it is fired or stored.

## Transporting, casing, and uncasing firearms

### Transporting

An important part of hunting is getting yourself and your firearm to your hunting location safely. In almost all instances, this will mean transporting your firearm in a vehicle. **NEVER carry a loaded firearm in a vehicle.**

Follow these rules when transporting a firearm:

-  Unload your firearm!
-  Place it in a protective case separate from ammunition.
-  Keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction when putting it into or taking it out of the vehicle.
-  Never pull the firearm toward you muzzle first!
-  Secure the firearm so that it cannot move during travel.
-  Position it so that the muzzle will not be pointing at anyone or any animal traveling in the vehicle.
-  If you have to leave the vehicle, store the firearm and ammunition in a locked place.

## Casing a Firearm



**1.** Completely unload and check firearm.



**2.** Close action after making sure it is empty.



**3.** Open case, place firearm inside, close case.



**4.** Place unloaded firearm securely in vehicle.

## Uncasing a Firearm



**1.** Carefully remove firearm from vehicle, maintaining muzzle control.



**2.** Lay firearm on solid surface (muzzle in safe direction), open case and open the action before removing the firearm from the case.



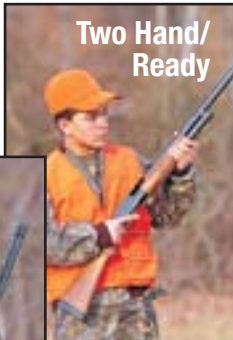
**3.** Check that the firearm is unloaded and check bore for obstructions.



## Field carries

A field carry refers to the position in which you carry your firearm while hunting. Be sure to protect the trigger area! Six commonly used methods are shown below.

**Two Hand/  
Ready**



### Two Hand/Ready Carry

Grasp the firearm with both hands. Carry it muzzle-up across the body. Cover the trigger guard with your hand. Never put your finger on the trigger.

This carry gives you the best control and can be one of the safest carries.

Do not use this carry if someone is walking on the side toward which the muzzle is pointing.

**Sling**



### Sling Carry

Hang the firearm from one shoulder by the sling, keeping the muzzle pointed upward. Hook your thumb under the sling while walking or standing.

This carry is one of the most comfortable but least secure.

**Elbow**



It is not well suited for walking in rough terrain or heavy brush.

Do not use this carry if someone is behind you.

### Elbow Carry

Tuck the firearm under your armpit and allow it to hang across your elbow, keeping the muzzle pointed at the ground in front of you.

This carry has the least muzzle control.

Use it only when no one is in front of you and there is little or no brush to catch the barrel.

**Cradle**



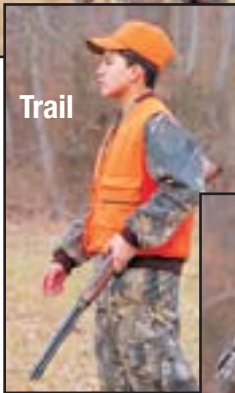
### Cradle Carry

Cradle the barrel in the bend of one arm while holding the stock with the other hand.

This is a comfortable carry and will not tire your arms.

Do not use this carry if someone is walking on the side toward which the muzzle is pointing.

**Trail**



### Trail Carry

Grip the stock with one hand, muzzle pointing down and in front of you.

This carry offers poor muzzle control, especially should you stumble or fall.

Do not use this carry when you are walking behind another person.

**Shoulder**



### Shoulder Carry

Hold the stock, and lean the firearm against your shoulder with the muzzle pointing up.

It works well in high brush, but is not secure.

Do not use this carry if someone is behind you.

## Firearm safety in the field

When do you load your firearm? That is, when do you chamber a round from the magazine into the action? There's no rule to tell you exactly when it is the right time. It depends on the situation as well as your experience and skill. Obviously, you never want to have a round chambered until you are actually hunting away from buildings and vehicles. However, if you wait until you are about to shoot, then the noise of loading may spook the animal. Also you may not focus your full attention on loading your gun safely since you are looking to see what the animal is doing. A reasonable and safe compromise is to chamber a round with the safety of the firearm on "safe" when you get close to an area where you expect to find game. Never walk around with a loaded firearm and the safety in the "fire" position.

### Preventing falls

A fall or stumble while hunting with a firearm can lead to severe injury or even death. To minimize the likelihood of a fall or stumble, follow these guidelines:

- 🦌 Never jump or run while carrying a loaded firearm.
- 🦌 Always unload your firearm when on poor footing such as loose rock, steep hillsides, or when crossing obstacles such as fences, streams, or ditches.
- 🦌 Do not try to cross a stream by walking on a fallen log! Find another place to cross or wade if possible.
- 🦌 Wear proper footgear! Deep treaded lace-up hunting boots provide good traction and ankle support.
- 🦌 If you do stumble or fall, make every effort to control the firearm and maintain muzzle control so that it is pointing away from you and your hunting companions. After a fall, point the firearm in a safe direction, open the action, unload the firearm, and check for any barrel obstructions. Even a tiny amount of mud, snow, or other debris can be extremely dangerous. Placing one layer of adhesive tape over the muzzle keeps snow and dirt out.






### Firearms in tree stands

Follow these steps to get your firearm safely into and out of a tree stand:

1. Unload your firearm, and leave the action open. PROVE it safe.
2. Lay it on the ground with the muzzle slightly elevated to prevent dirt and debris from getting into the barrel.
3. Tie a short rope or cord around the stock, and attach the other end to the barrel. This "bridle" will give you a means to attach your hoist rope. If your firearm has a sling, use it instead.
4. Tie or attach the hoist rope securely to the center of the sling or bridle so that the barrel does not point up when the firearm is lifted. Make sure the hoist rope is a bit longer than the height of the tree stand above the ground.
5. Climb the tree with the hoist rope attached to your belt where it will not become easily entangled while you climb.

6. Once you are secure in your tree stand, haul up the firearm, and remove the haul line and bridle.
7. Check the firearm barrel for obstructions. Reload it.
8. To lower the firearm, attach the rope the same way you did when hoisting the firearm up. Gently lower the firearm to the ground. Once you are back on the ground, check the barrel for obstructions.

### Firearms in a boat

-  The same rules apply as when transporting firearms in a vehicle—unload and case firearms before transporting them. The action should be open or the gun broken down, whichever makes the firearm safest.
-  Before boarding the boat, place the unloaded firearm into the bow (front) of the boat with its muzzle pointing forward.
-  When hunting with others, the first person settles in the bow position facing forward after the first gun is placed. Next place the second unloaded firearm in the stern (rear) of the boat with its muzzle pointing rearward. Then, the second person settles in the stern position facing rearward. Repeat the procedure when unloading from the boat.





## Crossing obstacles

You are certain to have to cross many types of obstacles when you are in the field. The method of crossing is different depending on whether you are alone or with a companion.

If you are alone, follow these steps to safely cross an obstacle:



**Step 1:** Unload your firearm and leave the action open.



**Step 2:** Carefully place your firearm on the ground under the obstacle, with the muzzle pointing in the direction away from you. Keep the muzzle and action away from mud and debris.



**Step 3:** Cross the obstacle far enough from the firearm so that if you fall, you won't fall on the firearm. Retrieve the firearm by approaching the firearm's stock end, not the muzzle end.

If you are with others, follow these steps to safely cross an obstacle:



**Step 1:** Unload your firearms and leave the actions open.



**Step 2:** One hunter crosses the obstacle while the second holds the firearms.



**Step 3:** The hunter who has not yet crossed passes the firearms over the obstacle to the first hunter and then crosses the obstacle.

**Remember:** Always unload a firearm before crossing any obstacle. Do not lean a firearm against the fence or obstacle while you are crossing it.





## When is a shot safe?

The area in which a hunter can shoot safely is referred to as a zone-of-fire. Before setting off in a group, hunters should agree on the zone-of-fire each person will cover. A zone-of-fire depends on many factors, including the hunter's shooting ability, the game being hunted, the hunting environment, and the hunting strategy being used. A hunter's zone-of-fire changes with every step. This is particularly true of groups hunting birds, rabbits, or other small game.

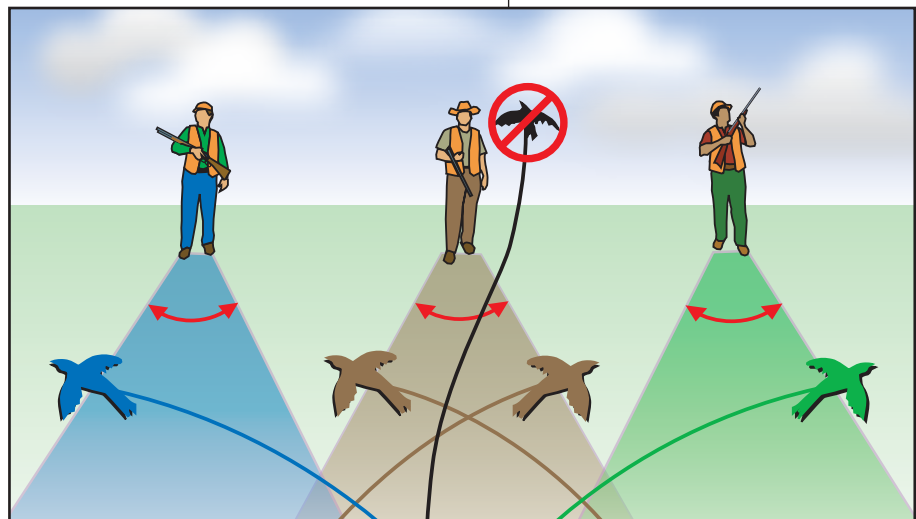
- 🦌 For safety purposes, it's best to have no more than three hunters in a group. For new hunters, two is a safer number until they become familiar with maintaining a proper zone-of-fire.
- 🦌 Hunters should be spaced 25 to 40 yards apart and always in sight of one another. Each hunter has a zone-of-fire which spans about 45 degrees directly in front of each hunter. (Some states require an adult to be immediately beside a youth hunter. In this case, the adult should be a supervisor only—not a hunter.)
- 🦌 A way to visualize 45 degrees is to focus on a distant, fixed object that is straight out in front of you. Stretch your arms straight out from your sides. Make a fist with your thumbs held up. Gradually draw your arms in toward the front until both thumbs are in focus without moving your eyes. This will give you your outer boundaries.
- 🦌 If three hunters are walking side by side hunting pheasants, the hunter in the center will shoot at birds flushed in the middle which fly straight away. The other hunters will shoot at birds flying toward their end of the line.
- 🦌 If a bird turns and flies back across the line of hunters, it's best if all three hold their swings and do not fire. The same is true of a rabbit scurrying back between the hunters.
- 🦌 No hunter, especially when swinging on game, should allow his or her gun to point at a person. Better to pass up a shot than risk injuring someone or damaging property.
- 🦌 Everyone hunting in these situations should wear hunter orange whether it's required by law or not.

**Before shooting, you must be able to answer YES to these three questions:**

**Is it safe?**

**Is it legal?**

**Is it responsible?**



### Sky-lined Game Animals



Do ***NOT*** take an  
*on-top-of-the-hill* shot.

### Unsafe shots

There are many instances in the field when you will be tempted to take the shot. If you find yourself in any of the following situations, **DO NOT** shoot.

- 🦌 You see an animal you can't identify.
- 🦌 You hear a sound or catch a movement out of the corner of your eye.
- 🦌 Your target is "sky-lined"—standing at or moving over the top of a hill.
- 🦌 If you miss your target, the trajectory and angle of travel of your bullet or shot might injure others including animals.
- 🦌 Your target is clearly out of range.
- 🦌 There are objects in the foreground in your line of fire that could deflect your bullet and cause it to travel in unsafe directions. Shooting at hard surfaces such as frozen ground or water may cause the bullet to ricochet.

Never shoot at a flock of animals. Pick out a single bird or animal when shooting. Flock shooting increases the chances of injury rather than a clean kill.

### Cleaning and storing your firearm

#### Cleaning your firearm

- 🦌 Firearms must be cleaned after every use to keep them in top condition. Every hunter should own a complete cleaning kit.
- 🦌 Work on a cleared table or bench. Always give cleaning your full attention. Never clean a firearm while doing something else.
- 🦌 Follow these basic steps to clean your firearm.
  - Point the muzzle in a safe direction, and make sure the gun is unloaded.
  - Remove all ammunition from the cleaning bench.
  - For the most thorough cleaning, field strip the firearm as directed in the firearm owner's manual. Then clean each part separately.

### See and Be Seen!

Wearing hunter, or "blaze," orange clothing makes it much easier for other hunters to see you and therefore much less likely that they will mistake you for a target!

In Montana, the law requires that all big game hunters and anyone accompanying a hunter must have at least 400 square inches of hunter orange material above the waist visible at all times. That's 20 x 20 inches, or roughly four times the size of this sheet of paper. It's a good idea for bird hunters to wear hunter orange as well.

Never do anything that might make someone mistake you for game or that might cover up your hunter orange. For example, make sure your backpack doesn't cover your orange, don't carry a deer over your shoulders, and avoid wearing tan, brown, or white clothing.



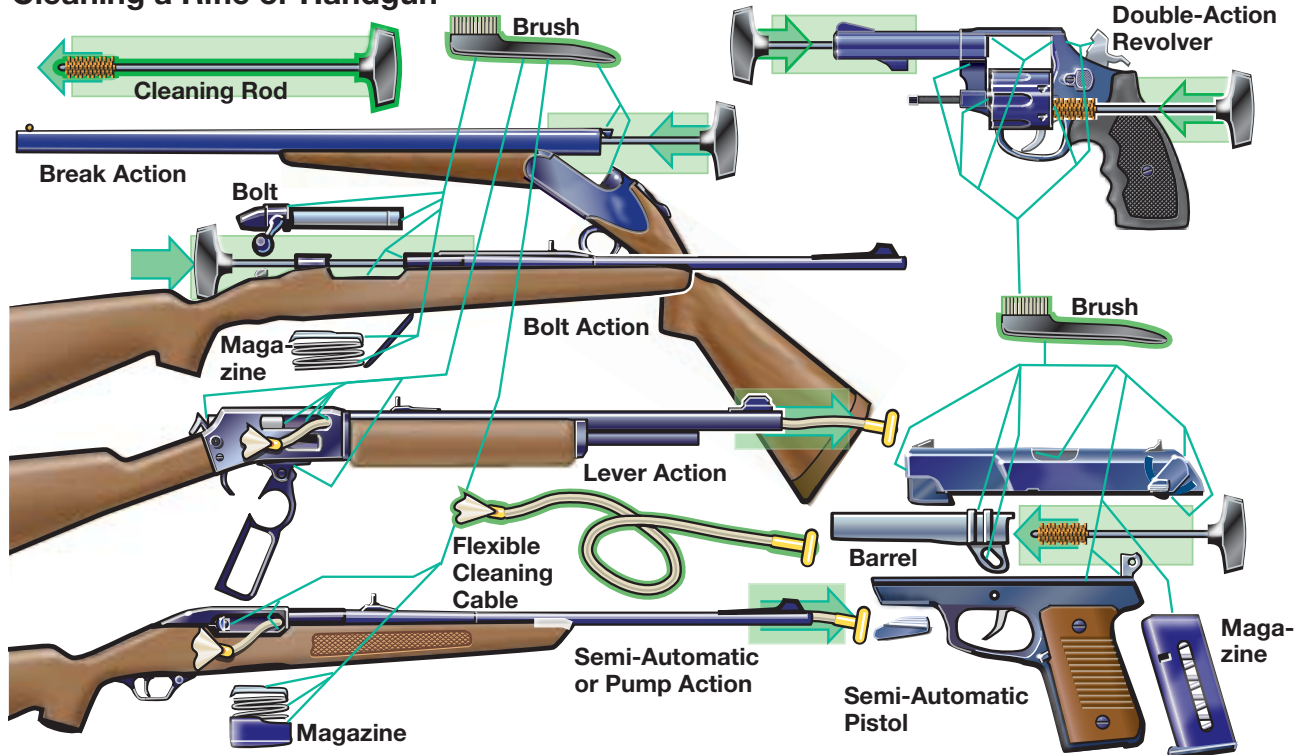
- Follow the instructions in your cleaning kit. If possible, clean the barrel from the breech end, using a bore guide and a cleaning rod holding a bore-brush or patch, wetted with solvent. Pass the brush/patch all the way through the barrel. Repeat several times with fresh patches. You may need a larger brush for the chamber. Use a hand brush to clean the crevices where powder residue accumulates. Follow with a dry patch, and finish with a lightly-oiled patch for the barrel. Use cloth for other parts.

- Use a flexible “pull-through” cleaning cable when cleaning firearms with lever or semi-automatic actions to prevent dirt, grime, or debris from being pushed into the action area.
- Use cleaning solvents in a well-ventilated area and only as directed.
- If cleaning from the muzzle end, use a muzzle protector so you don’t damage the rifling near the muzzle.

### Cleaning Kit

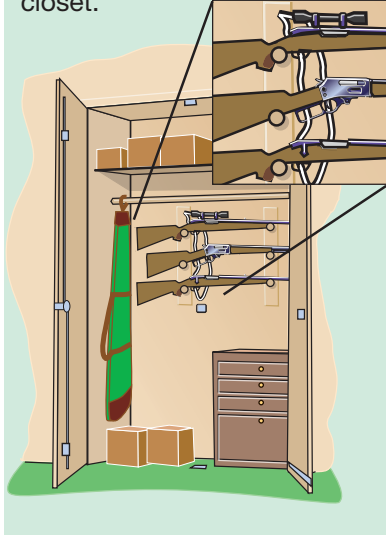
- A stand to hold the firearm securely in a horizontal position
- Cleaning rods
- Assorted rod tips—brushes, mop tips, slotted tips, jag tips
- Patches appropriate for the caliber or gauge of the firearm
- Gunsmith screwdrivers
- Gun oil
- Solvent
- Gun grease
- Dental mirror
- Toothbrush
- Bore light
- Clean cloths
- Cotton swabs
- Pipe cleaners

### Cleaning a Rifle or Handgun



## Storing Firearms

Store firearms with a locking device if stored in an accessible area such as a closet.



## Storing your firearm

- 🦌 Firearms must be stored *unloaded* and in a *locked* location, *separate from ammunition*. The storage area should be cool, clean, and dry. Storing firearms in closed gun cases or scabbards isn't recommended because moisture can accumulate.
- 🦌 Store guns horizontally, or with the muzzle pointing down. When guns are stored upright, gravity pulls gun oil downward into the action, which forms a sticky film. Oil also can drain onto the stock, softening the wood.
- 🦌 Displaying guns in glass cabinets or wall racks is an invitation to thieves and curious children. Ideally, guns should be hidden from view and locked. Storage devices with hidden compartments are available. For the best protection against theft and fire damage, purchase a safe.

## Storing ammunition

- 🦌 Store ammunition, reloading supplies, and firearms in separate locked compartments.
- 🦌 Store ammunition in a cool, dry place to prevent corrosion. Corroded ammunition can cause jamming, misfires, and other safety problems.
- 🦌 Keep all ammunition away from flammables.

## Alcohol and Drugs

Never consume alcohol or other drugs while hunting or when handling firearms. Do not hunt or shoot with anyone who has. Hunting while drunk or while drinking is extremely dangerous to yourself and others. Alcohol affects your mental and physical abilities and impairs your ability to make a good decision. Medicines that cause drowsiness can be especially dangerous when you are handling firearms, when operating motorized vehicles, or when hunting from tree stands. Always stay fully alert when around firearms!

Examples of hunting skills impaired by alcohol and drugs include:

Ability	Hunting skills negatively affected.
Judgment	Ability to determine when to shoot and when not to shoot; safe zone of fire.
Coordination	Ability to safely handle firearms; cross obstacles or rough terrain; marksmanship; reaction time.
Speech	Ability to communicate clearly with other members of the hunting party.
Hearing	Ability to locate game.
Vision	Ability to identify game.



## Chapter Four Quiz

1. To load or unload a firearm safely, you should always \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. put the safety on.
  - b. dry fire the firearm before loading and after unloading.
  - c. point the muzzle in a safe direction.
  - d. both a. and c.
  
2. \_\_\_\_\_ is not a safe way to transport a firearm.
  - a. Unloaded
  - b. With the action open
  - c. In a gun case
  - d. Loaded and in a gun rack in the rear window
  
3. Which of the following steps apply when accepting a firearm from another person? (Mark the correct answer(s).)
 

\_\_\_\_\_ Make sure that the action is open, and visually check the chamber and magazine before touching the firearm.

\_\_\_\_\_ Grasp the firearm in both hands, keeping the muzzle pointed in a safe direction.

\_\_\_\_\_ Thank the other person to let them know you have control of the firearm.

\_\_\_\_\_ All of the above.
  
4. If three hunters are walking side by side, the hunter in the center should keep the gun pointed \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.
  
5. If three hunters are walking in single file, it is acceptable for the hunter in the center to use the \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. cradle carry.
  - b. elbow carry.
  - c. shoulder carry.
  - d. trail carry.
  
6. Firearms should always be stored unloaded, separate from ammunition, each in separate, locked storage cabinets or units. (Choose the correct answer.)
 

\_\_\_\_\_ true

\_\_\_\_\_ false
  
7. The carry method that offers the best control of your firearm is: (Mark the correct answer.)
 

\_\_\_\_\_ cradle carry

\_\_\_\_\_ shoulder carry

\_\_\_\_\_ two-hand carry

\_\_\_\_\_ side carry
  
8. If you should stumble or fall while carrying a firearm: (Mark the correct answer.)
 

\_\_\_\_\_ make every effort to control the direction of the muzzle so that it does not point at you or others.

\_\_\_\_\_ unload the firearm and check the barrel for obstructions.

\_\_\_\_\_ clean the barrel with a portable cleaning kit, if necessary.

\_\_\_\_\_ do all of the above.

10. When crossing a fence with a firearm, the first step is always to unload your firearm and leave the action open. (Choose the correct answer.)

☐ true  
☐ false

11. When two hunters, each carrying a firearm, are crossing an obstacle such as a fence: (Mark the correct answer.)

☐ one hunter crosses over the obstacle first, and the loaded firearms are handed to him/her.  
☐ both hunters cross over at the same time, each carrying their own firearms with the muzzles pointed in a safe direction.  
☐ one passes his or her unloaded, action open, firearm to the other, then crosses the obstacle first, and then the unloaded firearms with the actions open and the muzzles pointed in a safe direction are passed to him/her so the other hunter can safely cross the obstacle.

12. Would you consider it a safe or unsafe situation to shoot at the game in this figure? (Choose the correct answer.)

☐ safe  
☐ unsafe



13. The use of alcohol or drugs impairs which of the body's abilities listed below? (Mark the correct answer(s).)

☐ hearing  
☐ judgment  
☐ vision  
☐ coordination  
☐ all of the above

14. The main reason for wearing hunter orange clothing while hunting is to: (Mark the correct answers.)

☐ make it more difficult for game to see you.  
☐ continue an old hunting tradition.  
☐ make yourself more visible to other hunters.